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Overseas Press Club's 25 Years

By Mary Hornaday

Journalists are notoriously bad businessmen, so when a press club rounds out 25 years as the Overseas Press Club of America, Inc., has just done, that's news.

Secretary of State Dean Rusk came up from Washington, April 7, to help the club celebrate at its silver anniversary dinner. The atmosphere was so cordial you wouldn't have known that only a few weeks ago the State Department had protested against some of the club's activities—specifically the platform it gave to Mme Nhu when she came to the United States in behalf of the faltering Diem government.

A gangling but vital press organization, despite the aura of nostalgia around its West 40th Street premises, the club has never been one to be "managed." One of its chief assets has been its Freedom of Information Committee which has always been ready to call international attention to any infringement of press rights or suppression of news. Many times the club has stepped in as spokesman and protector for the correspondent.

When the AP's William Oatis was imprisoned by the Czechs the club recommended a course of action to the State Department to effect his release. Dickey Chapelle writes of her incarceration in a Hungarian jail during the freedom fight: "The Overseas Press Club of New York which had worked for my release from the hour the AP wire clicked out the announcement that I was missing, gave me a family-style welcome."

A few years back, the club wired Secretary of State Dulles deploring his effort to punish three reporters who violated the State Department ban on travel in Red China. John Wilhelm, of McGraw-Hill, then president, protested: "If the press were to cover only the safe news or news areas in which the State Department could afford them protection, it would not be doing its job of covering all the news." Notwithstanding the club's protest, one of the travelers, William Worthy had his passport lifted and later went to Cuba without it. On his return to the United States he was indicted, but the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals in New Orleans has now held him not guilty.

The club has intervened in dozens of cases where newspapers have been closed down by governments for what they printed, where correspondents have been ousted or jailed and where their facilities have been curtailed. All

over the world, the club has become a force to be reckoned with in enabling the correspondent to do his job as a disseminator of information.

That this is not always a safe job is testified to by the memorial in the club's 10th floor lounge to 95 correspondents who lost their lives in the line of duty.

In the case of Mme Nhu, the New York Herald Tribune's "Joe" Newman, who invited her to the United States, thinks the club may have saved her life. Over the State Department's protest the OPC decided to give her a platform on the ground that whether one agreed with her or not, as a controversial figure from a country with which the United States had important connections, she was "news." It was while she was in this country that her husband and brother-in-law were killed in the Vietnamese coup that ended their regime.

From a handful of founding members the OPC has grown to a membership of 3,500, some of whom here in New York enjoy the club's easy chairs, stacks of newspapers, news tickers, and a dining room that on occasion serves dinners typical of places they fondly remember. Others, scattered over the world, get news of their colleagues through an airmailed weekly bulletin. Annual dinners have as their principal theme the OPC annual awards for outstanding work in journalism. A charitable fund which had as its first president H. V. Kaltenborn, is now headed by the New York Times Foreign Editor, Emanuel Freedman.

As part of its 25th anniversary celebration, the club is publishing another in its series of books. Titled "Now It Can Be Told," it will have among its contributors Mary Hemingway, John Daly, Drew Middleton, Margaret Bourke-White, and Harrison Salisbury.

The OPC's most vital, though not always agreeable, force is its annual political campaigns. This year the incumbent president Barrett McGurn of the New York Herald Tribune is being challenged by the AP's William L. Ryan. Barrett wants one more year toward making the OPC "the great international home of the American foreign correspondent." Bill says the club has become a "burgeoning bureaucracy." But no matter who wins, the OPC will continue to stand for a free press and for a diverse, unmanaged one, as visualized in the United States Bill of Rights.